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## Japanese “pull out” classes: a new “community of practice” for the newcomers in Japanese public schools\*

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西欧先進諸国に続いて日本もまた、膨大な数のニューカマーを受け入れは始めている。その多くは南アメリカ、主にブラジルからの移入者である。1990年6月の「出入国管理及び難民認定法」施行以降、日本の公立学校もこの移入に伴う衝撃に直面することになった。

本論文は、伝統的「同一性」を重んじる日本の教育現場において新たに形成されつつある「実践共同体」について考察する。

ニューカマーの数的増加と共に彼らの文化的・言語的背景の多様さも教育現場に持ち込まれ、彼らの多様な背景を公立学校でどう扱うのか、注意深い計画が期待されることになった。しかし、現実には、状況を改善するためにとられたはずの手段のほとんどが、同一校内に別個の新しい集団を形成するという結果になった。そして、ほとんどのニューカマーが自分たちの住む社会への平等な参加機会を得られずにいる。

### 1 Introduction

In recent times Japan has experienced a migration of newcomers, mainly ‘guest workers’, following the industrialized West European countries of the 1960’s. This inflow has shown a significant annual increase since the change in the Immigration Law in 1990 in favor of the Nikkeijin<sup>1)</sup>. Just as a refer-

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<sup>1)</sup> Mostly second and third generation descendants of Japanese immigrants to Brazil and their families. They were granted a special visa to enter Japan allowing them to work.

ence, there are nowadays more than 200,000 Brazilians<sup>2)</sup> in Japan.

Various public institutions, particularly elementary and junior high schools (EJHS) and some high schools (HS) have also felt the impact of this migration (Ota 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1998). There are more than 12,000<sup>3)</sup> Brazilian children and teenagers in school age who entered Japan but only about 8,000 are actually enrolled in Japanese public schools since schooling is not compulsory for foreigners as it is for Japanese nationals. There is a gap in numbers between the number of students who are in school age therefore should be receiving education and who are actually enrolled in schools. The newcomers are granted permission to attend schools and are identified as "Children and Teenagers in Need of Special Japanese Classes" by the Japanese Ministry of Education<sup>4)</sup>.

This paper attempts to discuss the formation of a new "community of practice" (Lave and Wenger 1991) in the traditional "homogeneous" Japanese educational setting. It is based on a fieldwork that has been conducted since 1995. Simultaneously not only there was an increase in numbers of the newcomers but also in the variety of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Consequently, a careful planning would be expected to deal with the new different base in the public schools but most of the measures taken to improve the situation contributed even more to this formation of a distinct group within the same school frame where most of the newcomers end up not having an equal chance of participation in the society they live in.

## 2 Purpose of this study

The Japanese Ministry of Education went through different processes

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<sup>2)</sup> Data from the Ministry of Justice of 1997. And this number has increased to more than 230,000 in 1998.

<sup>3)</sup> According to data from the Ministry of Justice of 1997. And in 1998, this number has increased up to more than 16,000 in one year.

<sup>4)</sup> This is to differentiate them from the old timers or oldcomers, mostly Korean descendants whose arrival date back to pre- Second World War. There are more than 645,000 Koreans in Japan based on data from the Ministry of Justice in 1998.

after giving permission to the newcomers to attend Japanese schools. Nevertheless, the basic ideology of acculturation and assimilation of other cultures behind all the measures did not change in a way to give assistance to the real needs of the disempowered minority newcomers<sup>5)</sup>.

This study aims to show that the newcomers can be divided in three subgroups according to the results of observation conducted in the schools. And it becomes clear that through this division, there are those who will have a chance to pursue higher levels of education after graduating junior high schools and those who will not. There is a lack of preparation of a careful policy dealing with the new educational reality in general until now. Most of the measures taken by the Ministry of Education were nothing but ultimate responses when the problems achieved extreme proportions and a reaction was needed.

According to the participation framework of situated learning that Lave and Wenger<sup>6)</sup> proposes focusing on the relationship between learning and the social situations, it is possible to consider the formation of the “pull out” classes as a new community of practice in the schools. It is due to the fact that only in these classes the newly arrived students are able to participate in a collaborative way in the process of learning. Certain social rules and attitudes are also expected from its members in this sense, aside from the school rules.

### 3 The situation of the newcomers

#### 3.1 Subdivision of newcomers in subgroups

The newcomers can be informally divided in three subgroups depending mainly on the adaptation level in the Japanese school system and acquisition of Japanese. The newly arrived students (NAS) are usually “pull out” from the “regular classes” which usually demand greater knowledge of Japanese

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<sup>5)</sup> It can be said that the measures are results of the treatment the Koreans had received through out the years of acculturation and assimilation in Japan.

<sup>6)</sup> See Reference

and gathered in a separate class for a few hours per week on temporary basis. But most of the time they are left in the regular classes with no much special attention since they only speak their first languages, not being able to participate in most of the classroom activities. In one city where research has been conducted from the total of 49 students, the majority, about 30 students can be classified as NAS.

There is a second group of students, most of them bilingual students (BS) who still attend very few “pull out” classes but can participate in the classroom activities until a certain extent. Most of them are bilingual, speaking their first languages at home<sup>7)</sup> and being able to express themselves in Japanese. They usually have good relationship with the NAS group, and many times serve as interpreters and information providers about the Japanese school rules. There are about 11 who can be members of this group.

Lastly, there is a third group of students, the pioneers (PS) who were usually the first ones to arrive in their regions and to enter the Japanese schools at a time when there was absolutely no preparation to receive them. They attend only the regular classes and most of them cannot even be differentiated from the other classmates, since for most of them the language spoken at home switched to Japanese. In consequence, many cannot speak Portuguese or their first languages anymore or do not want to after being obliged to develop a negative attitude towards their background. They seem to be able to fully participate in the classes at the cost of their acculturation. Most of the times, they do not have any relationship with the other students in the “pull out” classes. There are 8 students who could be considered from this group.

### 3.2 Characteristics of the Japanese “pull out” classes

There are large regional discrepancies about the physical space and the way the “pull out” classes are offered in each city. But the number of class

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<sup>7)</sup> It means that they know the spoken language and it does not mean the knowledge of written language, especially the young ones.

hours offered still depends mainly on the availability of teachers and students in each school and varies from one up to 6 hours per week and not according to the student needs as it would be expected. Usually classes are offered on temporary basis since they are held according to the availability of physical space and it varies from school to school (Hatano 1997). Only when the number of students is quite significant, and there is a free classroom available, a Japanese class is secured for the newcomers.

The NAS are pulled out from classes such as national language (Japanese), math, social sciences, sciences and English<sup>8)</sup>. It is important to note that there is a great dilemma here. They are usually pulled out from the classes which place great demand on knowledge of Japanese they lack. But pulling out from these classes is also contradictory since the more they stay away from these classes to learn Japanese, the more difficult it turns to be for them to participate in these classes later. And the lack of the content knowledge also restricts their choices for the future since knowledge of these subjects are fundamental requirements in the entrance exams in the Japanese high schools. In consequence most of the Brazilian teenagers are unable to take the exams in the same way as the Japanese. Then, their only option left is to stop studying after graduation in the junior high school and start working at young age when their parents opt to continue working in Japan. There are two students who already graduated and joined the working force, one was a BS. There are other two, who went back to Brazil whose parents were highly conscious of the importance of education and noticed that their children would not have a chance to pursue higher education in Japan after graduating junior high school.

### 3.3 Newcomers in the "pull out" classes and the different stages

In the "pull out" classes, the students are able to interact with other experienced newcomers, the BS, which is important for their second language acquisition development (Lantolf and Appel 1994). But in most of the regular

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<sup>8)</sup> English classes are usually given in the junior high school.

classes nowadays the newcomers are all separated from each other intentionally to avoid the situation where they end up communicating most of the time in their first languages among themselves. The ideology behind this is that the use of the first language is harmful and interfere in the acquisition and development of Japanese as a second language<sup>9)</sup>.

There is not much interaction between the NAS and the PS. It is necessary to admit that the language barrier exists in many situations since the PS not always can communicate in their first languages anymore. But more than that, it seems that the main reason is the negative attitude the PS were obliged to adopt in order to be accepted as members of the mainstream throughout the years of adaptation in the Japanese schools. They are also very conscious of all the processes and efforts they had to go through in order to achieve the position they hold at the moment and how much more they need to be able to enter high school. In this sense, many times it seems true that the successful and "assimilated" PS under look the NAS if they are not able to do by themselves in the same way they did. It is a reasonable reaction since the PS arrived at a time when no interpreters or part-time teachers were available, they were just abandoned in the regular class from the first day and expected to learn Japanese in a "natural" way. There are actually some students who refused to attend the "pull-out" classes even when it was recommended by their teachers.

In the beginning when more students were starting to arrive, the PS were many times strategically placed beside the NAS to help and translate into their first languages during the regular classes. But soon the responsibility and the stress of always having to translate right for the NAS, and the high dependency of the NAS on the PS started to be a burden to the PS as the studies were already difficult enough and demanding for the PS themselves alone.

The next measure adopted then was to try to place the NAS with BS who

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<sup>9)</sup> There are cases where Japanese is not the second language for the child to be in contact with. In this respect, second language means not only a second language but third, and so forth.

were more acquainted with each other since both were attending the "pull out" classes. But in this way, it seems that during the regular classes they were disturbing the other students by engaging in other activities within the classes which the teachers could not be in control of, and since they used their first languages most of their time, there was a great delay in the acquisition of Japanese by the NAS.

As a consequence, nowadays, the schools which experienced these stages described above adopt different measures towards the NAS. If there are more than one NAS from the same country in the same grade, they are put in separate classes. And if they are in the first grades of the elementary school, they are usually not pulled out from the regular classes to make them learn naturally as the Japanese. It is disregarded the fact that they do not start from the same starting point since they do not share the same cultural background when enrolling the first grade.

#### **4 The Japanese "pull out" classes as a new community of practice**

Participation is essential for learning to take place, as well as interaction of masters (experienced learners, including BS and PS as well as native speakers) and apprentices, the NAS. (Lave and Wenger). Having this framework in mind, to start with the regular classes in the way they are conducted at the present moment are not proper places to learning take place.

The NAS are left apart from most of the activities held in class and they are not only unable to participate in them, but little by little they are forced to loose their self esteem and confidence of their abilities as experts in other languages. It is unquestionable that they do have the same capacity and many times the background knowledge but in another code, that is, not in Japanese. They are unable to participate since no adaptations or changes were made to make their participation possible. And in consequence sooner or later they start loosing their motivations to learn since they start thinking that they are not intelligent enough to be able to pursue studies any further as the other



classmates in the regular classes.

But in the "pull out" classes, things are different, they are able to start as peripheral learners but as members of the community of practice of the newcomers in these classes. They become potential full participants of the activities in these classes. As they restore their confidence in these classes, and are able to make their contribution in the activities, they do not want leave them to go back to the regular classes where most of the times they are totally ignored. There are many cases in the junior high school where since education is not compulsory for foreigners, they only come to school in the hours of the "pull out" classes and leave the school whenever they want. When a problem occurs and they do not want to attend school at all, since they are only granted permission to attend, the school do not insist that these students go back to school or try to find out which was the problem which made the student leave the school.

## 5 Discussion and Summary

The attitudes and lack of serious planning of measures of the Ministry of Education towards the newcomers are based on the thought that they are temporary visitors in Japan. It has facilitated the formation of a new community of practice within the public schools which varies according to the number of newcomers, but in the essence it is the same.

During the "pull out" classes the newcomers are isolated from most of the activities in their regular classes. And those who insist to be only in the "pull out" classes seem to be doomed to stop studying at the age of 15 or 16 to join the working force soon after graduation, since there is no other option left.

There is an urgent need to reestablish the parameters of measures that following the Western industrialized countries, there is a clear tendency that the indecision of the newcomers to return to their home countries is making them stay in Japan as long term residents. In this way turns to be necessary a careful planning for an equal chance of participation in the society, as well as

access to their cultural inheritance and teaching methodologies of Japanese as second language for the newcomers and not as national language.

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